

**EXAMINATION OF QUALITY CUSTOMER SERVICE
IN THE MUSKEGON FIRE DEPARTMENT**

EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

This research project examines the quality of customer service within the Muskegon Fire Department. It further identifies recommendations that would improve the quality of the customer service provided by the department. It is written with the intention of not only assisting the Muskegon Fire Department with this endeavor, but also any other department embarking on a similar project.

Historical, descriptive, and evaluative research methods were used to examine the issue and to answer (a) what services were presented for study, (b) what internal and external sources were identified for survey, (c) what were the internal and external perceptions of service quality, (d) what lessons were learned from the research, and (e) what recommendations could be made on the issue of quality customer service.

The research relied on literature review to determine what had been accomplished in the past on the issue and on a survey of three focus groups to determine what perceptions of quality customer service were available in the community.

The most consistent finding that prevailed in all of the literature reviewed was that the issue of providing quality customer service must begin with a strong commitment from the top level of the organization. The surveys conducted revealed that both internal and external customers were happy with the level of technical and tactical service provided by the fire department. It also revealed that there was very little thought given by any focus group to the WOW side of quality customer service.

The recommendations provided as a result of this research included (a) gaining the commitment to quality customer service from city staff, (b) discuss ways to improve customer service with all staff, (c) explore and implement the ideas gathered to the extent

possible, (d) explore educational opportunities for all staff on customer service, and (e) implementation of ideas that were provided in the surveys. It must be noted by all that embark on this journey that it is a long and difficult road to follow, but the rewards are many to all involved.

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INTRODUCTION

The City of Muskegon including the Muskegon Fire Department is undergoing significant changes in the way we operate. In 1996 the city hired a consultant to delve deep into the operations of the city and to find out what we could do to improve. This was the first step toward introduction of Quality Management to the employees of the city.

The Muskegon Fire Department cooperated in the study and much information was gathered. With all the study, poking and prodding, it has done little to change much in the way that we operate on a day to day basis. The problem is that our perceived service quality within the Muskegon Fire Department by both internal and external customers is an unknown. In order to change our perceptions and make progress on our strategic planning we must, as a department, understand how we perceive our customer service, what we believe must be improved, and what the customer visualizes in the same area.

The purpose of this research is to examine and report on the various perceptions of quality both internally and externally. Historical, descriptive, and evaluative research methods were utilized to answer the following questions:

1. What services within the Muskegon Fire Department will be presented for examination?
2. What internal and external sources can be identified for survey?
3. What are the internal perceptions of service quality delivered by the Muskegon Fire Department?

4. What are the external perceptions of service quality delivered by the Muskegon Fire Department?
5. What lessons were learned, reference service quality, from the research conducted?
6. What recommendations can be made from the information gathered?

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

The Muskegon Fire Department is a department steeped in tradition and history. The members of the department take great pride in the accomplishments of the past and live for the challenges of the future. We are a small to medium sized department consisting of full paid members with no part paid or volunteer force. Our run total for 1997 was four thousand two hundred and thirty-two (4232) incidents (Muskegon Fire Department Annual Report, 1997). We run as medical first responders on all medical calls in the city, as well as all fire incidents. We are trained to the operations level for hazardous materials response, and have a team of personnel trained to provide Confined Space and Specialized Rescue. The Fire Prevention Bureau conducts all inspections, fire investigations, and public fire safety education. We are currently in the process of forming a Fire Explorer Post as a way to reach young people with an interest in a career in the fire service.

The department protects a city of 41,411 population and covers an area of 18.99 square miles (U. S. Census Bureau, 1996). The city is bordered on the west by Lake Michigan and on the North by Muskegon Lake. We are the largest city in the county and

are the most urban area. The area consists of an older core city of older residential properties, a business and government center, some heavy industry, newer residential in the outlying areas, beach front recreational, and newer industrial parks. Our ethnic makeup is very diverse with a 69.9% white, 27.1% black, and 3% other population diversity (U.S. Census Bureau, 1996).

The department began in 1873 which was the lumbering days with a group of volunteers that saw the need for fire protection in the growing urban environment. The department quickly grew to a full paid staff within a few years as the lumbering era boomed and sawmills lined the shoreline of Muskegon Lake.

The growth continued through the war years as the lumber mills gave way to the iron foundries that produced many of the parts necessary to maintain the war effort. As industry grew so did the Muskegon Fire Department. The department grew in size to include six (6) stations housing seven (7) engine companies, one (1) Ladder Company, one (1) rescue company, and command. The department roster grew to a high of eighty-eight (88) personnel.

This growth came to an abrupt halt with the recession of the late 70's and early 80's. The city was in financial straits and had to do something to balance the budget. As in most cities in similar situations the first things cut are public safety departments. During this period of time three stations were closed, four engine companies were eliminated, the ladder company is filled with off duty personnel on an as needed basis, and the personnel roster went to a low of thirty-seven (37) personnel that included the department secretary. Morale was low and personnel were going through the motions of job performance. Safety of the fire department personnel and the citizens was a

paramount concern. During this period of time the city studied the possibility of forming a public safety department in hopes of saving more money and, in their defense, attempting to make the best of a bad situation. The attempt failed through the efforts of many people and the introduction of new revenue in the form of a city income tax.

This new funding has allowed the Muskegon Fire Department to gain a total of eight (8) personnel and to make many necessary repairs to stations and to replace an aging fleet of apparatus. At the same time a new fire chief was brought in and new ideas began to unfold. We have begun to see a new way of operating and of viewing the public as a customer and not just as the taxpayer. The department is in the infant stage of this new way of thinking and after my introduction to customer service in the Executive Development Course at the National Fire Academy it became apparent that we need to measure what our level of quality service to the customer is, what we can do to improve our delivery, and to see what the customer believes is our level of quality service. This customer base includes the true customer that utilizes our services and the city management team that decides what our budget will be and the services that will be provided by this department. This project strives to measure the current level of service and to make recommendations that can be utilized as part of the Muskegon Fire Department's strategic planning process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Deming's Fourteen Points

One of the recognized experts in the field of quality service is W. Edwards Deming. His Fourteen Points are widely distributed and studied as one of the ways to stay in business and be successful. The fourteen points are as follows:

1. **Constancy of Purpose**

Create constancy of purpose for continual improvement of products and service...allocating resources to provide for long-range needs rather than short-term profitability, with a plan to become competitive, to stay in business, and to provide jobs.

2. **The New Philosophy**

Adopt the new philosophy. We are in a new economic age, created in Japan.... We can no longer live with commonly accepted levels of delays, mistakes, defective materials, and defective workmanship. Transformation of Western management style is necessary to halt the continued decline in industry.

3. **Cease Dependence on Inspection**

Eliminate the need for mass inspection as a way to achieve quality...by building quality into the product in the first place. Require statistical evidence of built-in quality in both manufacturing and purchasing functions.

4. **End "Lowest Tender" Contracts**

End the practice of awarding business solely on the basis of price tag... Instead, require meaningful measures of quality along with price. Reduce the number of suppliers for the same item by eliminating those that do not qualify with statistical

evidence of quality. The aim is to minimize total cost, not merely initial cost.

Purchasing managers have a new job and must learn it.

5. Improve Every Process

Improve constantly and forever every process for planning, production, and service.... Search continually for problems in order to improve every activity in the company, to improve quality and productivity, and thus to constantly decrease costs. It is the management's job to work continually on the system (design, incoming materials, training, supervision, retraining).

6. Institute Training on the Job

Institute modern methods of training on the job...including management, to make better use of all employees. New skills are required to keep up with changes in materials, methods, product design, machinery, techniques, and service.

7. Institute Leadership

Adopt and institute leadership aimed at helping people to do a better job.... The responsibility of managers and supervisors must be changed from sheer numbers to quality. Improvement of quality will automatically improve productivity.

Management must ensure that immediate action is taken on reports of inherited defects, maintenance requirements, poor tools, fuzzy operational definitions, and other conditions detrimental to quality.

8. Drive Out Fear

Encourage effective two-way communication and other means to drive out fear throughout the organization...so that everybody may work effectively and more productively for the company.

9. Break Down Barriers

Break down barriers between departments and staff areas.... People in different areas such as research, design, sales, administration, and production must work in teams to tackle problems that may be encountered with products or service.

10. Eliminate Exhortations

Eliminate the use of slogans, posters, and exhortations...for the workforce, demanding zero defects and new levels of productivity, without providing methods. Such exhortations only create adversarial relationships; the bulk of the causes of low quality and low productivity belong to the system and thus lie beyond the power of the workforce.

11. Eliminate Arbitrary Numerical Targets

Eliminate work standards that prescribe numerical quotas for the workforce and numerical goals for people in management.... Substitute aids and helpful supervision; use statistical methods for continual improvement of quality and productivity.

12. Permit Pride of Workmanship

Remove the barriers that rob hourly workers, and people in management, of their right to pride of workmanship.... This implies, inter alia, abolition of the annual merit rating (appraisal of performance) and of management-by-objective. Again, the responsibility of managers, supervisors, and foremen must be changed from sheer numbers to quality.

13. Encourage Education

Institute a vigorous program of education, and encourage self-improvement for everyone. What an organization needs is not just good people; it needs people that are improving with education. Advances in competitive position will have their roots in knowledge.

14. Top Management's Commitment

Clearly define top management's permanent commitment to ever-improving quality and productivity...and its obligation to implement all of these principles.

Create a structure in top management that will push every day on the preceding 13 Points, and take action in order to accomplish the transformation (MacDonald & Piggott, 1993, pp. 152-155).

It was necessary to use all fourteen points from the book with their synopsis given to better understand all that Deming is saying. They may look alien to many in the fire service, as they did to me, but if given the opportunity to open our minds we can find ways to implement all fourteen points in today's fire service. I examined each of the points and came up with my own meanings and how I see them fitting into the fire service today and what they mean to quality service.

1. Constancy of purpose is nothing more than striving to provide the best service possible to our customer. At one time the mainstay of the fire service was extinguishment of fire. Now it is as important to provide medical services and to keep up on the latest in hazardous materials technology to mitigate an emergency involving these circumstances. We have to be flexible and recognize that we

- must change with the technology or someone else will come along and do it better.
2. Adopt the new philosophy is believing in our new purpose and living it every day. Strive to make the changes necessary to stay competitive and an asset.
 3. By ceasing dependence on inspection we begin to trust in our personnel and what they can do. This is a learned process and will be hard for many of the long-term supervisors. Trust your personnel to do the job the right way. Show the way and offer encouragement rather than looking over their shoulders for compliance.
 4. Ending the practice of awarding the contract to the lowest bidder is another tough pill to swallow. It will take some effort to sell the financial people in the city on this one. If you look hard enough at the long term and stop thinking of the immediate savings it can be an asset to the budget. It will take a little more creativity and explanation to get the purchase approved.
 5. Look for ways to improve every process. Let all personnel examine their procedures and processes and then make recommendations on how they can be improved.
 6. Training on the job is crucial to the success of any fire service organization. We never stop learning and the opportunities are boundless if we take the opportunity to avail ourselves of them.
 7. Becoming a leader at all levels is crucial to the success of quality service. Know when to lead and when it is all right to follow another leader. Our role as leaders in the fire service is to show people the right way and let them make suggestions on how to improve from that.

8. Communication is key to driving out the fear and suspicion that accompanies changes of this magnitude. By communicating with personnel and letting them know that it is necessary for them to communicate as well is imperative. It must also be understood that this is done without reprisal.
9. Break down the barriers that exist between management and staff, city hall and the department, the customer and the department.
10. Give personnel a tangible and measurable goal to achieve rather than a slogan or poster that is meaningless and becomes the brunt of many firehouse jokes.
11. Eliminate numerical targets can be utilized in the inspection program. It should be the quality of the inspection that matters, not the number of inspections. The Muskegon Fire Department is investigating self-inspections by business owners as a way to get them involved in their own fire safety.
12. Personnel have to be able to take pride in a job well done. From a good stop on a fire to an excellent fire safety presentation, they need to know that the job was done well and recognized by management.
13. Educational opportunities in the fire service are endless and must be actively encouraged among all personnel.
14. None of this matters if top management does not buy into the program. This includes not only the Fire Chief, but also the City Manager and all top staff positions in the city.

Customer Service in the eyes of Chief Brunacini

One of the few books published for the fire service that deal specifically with customer service is written by Chief Brunacini of the Phoenix Fire Department. During research on this project I had the opportunity to read the book and to view a video taped presentation by him. Each chapter begins with one of his eight points for customer service as it relates to the fire service. These eight points are:

1. Our essential mission and number one priority is to deliver the best possible service to our customer.
2. Always be nice – treat everyone with respect, kindness, patience, and consideration.
3. Always attempt to execute a standard problem-solving outcome:
quick/effective/skillful/safe/caring/managed.
4. Regard everyone as a customer.
5. Consider how you and what you are doing looks to others.
6. Don't disqualify the customer with your qualifications.
7. Basic organizational behavior must become customer-centered.
8. We must continually improve our customer service performance (Brunacini, 1996, pp. iii & iv).

These statements appear to be simple and straightforward, but a closer examination reveals that they are thought provoking and sometimes difficult to always maintain. It is pointed out in the book that we are very good at the technical side of our profession but lack the training and history of doing the little extras that make the customer sit up and take notice. Brunacini (1996) calls this the WOW! service and further states “This basic

value-added approach uses our spirit and design as the basis for taking care of Mrs. Smith.” (Brunacini, 1996, 12)

This book on customer service written for the fire service is a first that should be utilized by any department embarking on the path of increasing our service to the customer. The crux of the book is empowering our personnel to provide a level of quality service that will leave a customer feeling that we really do care about them and not just the tactical-mechanical portions of our profession.

Other Literature Reviewed

There is a lack of information within the normal fire service reading materials that deal with this specific topic of customer service. In recent months there have been a couple of articles written in journals that deal with the subject. One of the articles in the NFPA Journal discusses the need to take private industry practices and embrace them in the public sector. It goes on to discuss Brunacini’s book and the impact it is having on the Arlington, Texas fire department and what they have done to implement a customer service standard above and beyond the normal (Paulsgrove, 1998, 32).

In the NFPA Update for December / January 1998, Fire Marshal Crawford of Portland, Oregon discusses the “Evolving Culture of the Fire Service.” His discussion centers on the fact that the fire service needs to realize that there is more than one way to protect the citizens of the community. It is a combination of prevention, education, and suppression that every fire organization must understand are the keys to success in our quest to serve the customer. Gone are the days of the fire department just putting out fires. We have to become aware and educated of the need to interact at many different levels with our customers.

An appropriate comment made in the article is the following passage. “.... The difference between successful companies and unsuccessful companies is akin to the difference between drill bits and holes. The company that thinks it’s in business to sell drill bits forgets that the customer really needs a hole. When another company invents a better, cheaper way to provide holes, the drill bit manufacturer goes out of business” (Crawford, 1998, 2). Our customers want the fire service to provide safety and we must realize that there are many ways to provide what they want.

The majority of literature on customer service can be found in the private sector. There are many books on the subject of customer service and quality. These two phrases are interchangeable with each other. MacDonald and Piggott give a definition of quality in their book on Global Quality. It states “... or provide services that consistently satisfy the consumer and your reputation will soar.” (MacDonald and Piggott, 1993, pg. 4) We must be willing to provide the quality and level of service that will continue to satisfy our customers and give us the reputation of great firefighters and excellent service providers. This will not come easily and requires a commitment and effort from all levels of the organization. It is no longer acceptable to just put the fire out, we have to do it as efficiently as possible and minimize the impact to the customer and give them the extra measure.

To get the level of quality customer service that is desired it takes a commitment to empower our personnel. Blanchard, Carlos, and Randolph 1996) examine empowerment and the steps it takes to empower employees. Blanchard et al. (1996) surmise that it takes a commitment from the top of the organization and that it is not going to happen overnight. Blanchard et al describe it as a journey that all in the

organization must be willing to embark on and that it is not going to be an easy road to take.

Along the same lines, Belasco and Stayer (1993) discuss what it takes to lead in the world we find ourselves operating in today. They discuss that the customer is more than someone that, in our case, seeks our services. They are partners and need to be recognized as such. We need to ask how we can assist them and then ask the question of ourselves; what can we do to make it more?

Peters (1987) gives five basic value-adding strategies to follow. These are listed below:

1. Provide Top Quality, as Perceived by the Customer.
2. Provide Superior Service/Emphasize the Intangibles.
3. Achieve Extraordinary Responsiveness.
4. Be an Internationalist.
5. Create Uniqueness.

These appear to be simple enough to follow, but a closer examination reveals that like Deming and Brunacini they take a lot of commitment and dedication. To provide the top quality that our customers want requires us to ask them what it means to them.

Emphasizing the intangibles speaks to the WOW that Brunacini talks about.

In summary, there is little written on the subject of customer service specifically for the fire service. There are however, many books, articles, and papers on the subject that are available from the private sector. With some minor modification and thought into what the authors are saying, all of these can be applied to the fire service.

It is not an easy mission to begin or complete. All authors point to a few facts that must be examined by anyone wishing to embark on this path. These include a commitment to the journey by all in the organization; there must be a desire by all involved, which is the entire organization, to practice excellent customer service at every occasion. It was very clear in all the literature reviewed that this is not a quick fix, nor can the journey be taken half-heartedly.

PROCEDURES

Research Methodology

It was the desire of the author to evaluate the level of customer service currently provided by the Muskegon Fire Department and to make any recommendations for improvements found necessary. The research was historic in nature with the examination of the department history and literature review conducted.

The research was descriptive in that a brief summary of the current conditions within the department was provided and the points made by Deming, Brunacini, and Peters were given with the author providing his interpretation of them.

Evaluative research was conducted with the introduction of a survey to both internal and external focus groups. This survey attempts to determine the perception of service provided by the Muskegon Fire Department from both the internal and external customer.

The research was conducted to answer the following questions:

1. What services within the Muskegon Fire Department will be presented for examination?

2. What internal and external sources can be identified for survey?
3. What are the internal perceptions of service quality delivered by Muskegon Fire Department?
4. What are the external perceptions of service quality delivered by Muskegon Fire Department?
5. What lessons were learned, reference customer service, from the research conducted?
6. What recommendations can be made from the information gathered?

Survey

Three focus groups were identified and surveys were sent to members of all three groups. It was important to identify both internal and external customers to get an accurate picture of how the Muskegon Fire Department was perceived in relationship to customer service. Two separate surveys were produced with one for the internal focus group and the other was sent to both external groups.

The internal group selected was the membership of the Muskegon Fire Department and included all uniform personnel with the exception of the author. It was imperative to get the feelings of the personnel of the department and to seek comments on what they saw were areas of improvement. The survey asked for a rating of 1-5, with one being not at all and five being all the time. The survey included a look at how we perceived the completion of our tactical missions in the main service areas of fire suppression, EMS, public education, fire investigation, and inspection/code enforcement. The rest of the questions dealt with the actual question of customer service and an area for written comments. A copy of the survey is in Appendix A.

The second focus group was the division heads for the various city government departments. These included the manager's office, finance, inspections, planning, public works, leisure services, and all other divisions in the city. The author felt a survey was necessary for this group because the fire department interacts on a daily basis with many of the departments and as important, receives its budget appropriations from the manager's and finance office. The survey sent to this group was similar in concept and make-up to the internal survey with grammar changes to reflect the questions from the external customer's perspective. A copy of this survey is located in Appendix B.

The third and final focus group chosen was the presidents and executive directors for the nine neighborhood associations within the City of Muskegon. Although these community based organizations are not associated with the city government they do act as a go between from the citizen to the municipal staff. All nine associations are active to varying degrees and represent all areas of the City of Muskegon. The author felt that these leaders within the neighborhoods would provide a fairly accurate perception of the fire department's quality customer service. The same external survey utilized for the city division heads was sent to this focus group. A copy of this survey can be found in Appendix B.

Assumptions and Limitations

The first assumption made was the author assumed that there was a need to increase the Muskegon Fire Departments customer service quality. It was believed that the surveys would bear out the fact that this department is very good at the tactical portion of the job, but the customers would see a need to improve the quality of the service provided.

The second assumption is that apathy in both the internal and external focus groups played a part in the number of surveys returned. This can be seen in the negative as a non-caring attitude, or positively as the department is functioning at a very high customer satisfaction rate. This author assumes that the lack of return internally is a combination of both and the same can be said for both external focus groups.

The single most significant limitation to this research was the number of surveys returned for review. None of the three focus groups were 100% in returning the surveys. There could be several explanations for not returning the surveys, which could include apathy on the part of respondents to a belief that what the recipient had to say was not important. This will result in skewing the results to either side depending on the results that were turned in.

As this research was conducted to make recommendations for improvement in the quality of customer service and not to provide or implement a specific plan of action the assumptions and limitations are minimal.

RESULTS

Answers to Research Questions

Research Question 1. The author decided that it was important to get a perception from the surveys as to what the customer seen in the performance of our primary tactical roles. These included five areas all covered in one question and asked the respondents to rate the Muskegon Fire Department from 1 to 5 on fire suppression, EMS delivery, public education, fire investigation, and inspection/code enforcement. The author did not

include technical rescue or hazardous material responses, as the technical rescue is relatively new and utilized mainly with our public works department and industrial customers. Hazardous materials response was omitted because of the relative small number of responses and these are primarily too commercial customers. The five areas selected are the areas that most internal and external customers would be familiar with.

Research Question 2. The internal customer selected as a focus group was the entire membership of the Muskegon Fire Department with the exception of the author and the temporary secretary. The total number is forty-two which includes the Chief. As stated in all of the literature reviewed any changes in operation and increase in providing quality customer service must start at the top of the organization. It was important to get the internal perception as any change in the operation will affect all members and all members must become a part of the team to make the improvements work.

Two focus groups were selected from the external customers. The first external group was the division and department managers for the various city departments. Although some could argue that this group could be considered an internal group, as they are all employees of the city, this author felt that they fit better as an external group. This is mainly due to the fact that although they are employees of the city, they have limited knowledge and contact with the fire department and have a limited knowledge base on what operations are actually performed by the fire service. At the same time, this author felt it necessary to include this group in the survey. Several reasons come to mind, including the fact that members of this group decide on the budget annually. They also need to become aware of what the fire department does, and this research paper will be

shared with them with the anticipation that some of the ideas contained in the report can be utilized in other departments.

The final external focus group was the presidents and executive directors of the nine neighborhood associations located within the boundaries of the City of Muskegon. These people are elected or appointed by the citizens within their neighborhood to represent them and their interests to the city government. For the most part these individuals are dedicated, have the best interests of their neighborhoods in heart, and have a good understanding of the various departments within the city.

Research Question 3. Of the forty-three surveys sent out, to the personnel in the fire department, nineteen were returned. This represents a 44% return in the surveys. The feedback provided on these surveys was enlightening and can be very useful when initiating any new procedures to enhance customer service. A table is inserted to show how the respondents rated the five questions on the survey. All comments supplied in the comment section are also included. The author believes that the comments presented are as important as the survey results. The various members of the fire department supplied the following comments:

1. Get out in the public more.
2. Quality of service is abstract. Critical evaluation and the occasional public comment are the only feedback received.
3. Being able to meet the customers needs at the time they are needed, most of the time we do a good job with that.
4. More public education by shift personnel.

5. Establish quality service programs within the department which could include providing cardboard boxes for fire victims to salvage their possessions.
6. Respect for their loss is not always observed.
7. Muskegon Fire Department provides a high quality work output. Our relationship with the customer is often poor.

The following table represents the internal survey results:

Internal Survey Results					
Ratings					
Question	1	2	3	4	5
1a				53%	47%
1b		5%		63%	32%
1c		15%	58%	26%	
1d			17%	55%	27%
1e		11%	33%	50%	5%
2			10%	68%	21%
3		11%	31%	42%	16%
4	5%	42%	37%	16%	
5		10%	16%	58%	16%

The findings of this and all survey results will be examined in the discussion portion of this research project.

The next survey conducted was that of the division and department heads within the City of Muskegon government. Of the twelve surveys distributed, six were returned for a 50% return rate. This group in the comment section presented the following comments:

1. Suggest looking at the following programs community firefighting, first aid/CPR training programs for the public, Home Fire Safety Audits, Vocational Training/Awareness, Cadet or Ride-a-long program.

2. Provide the customer, after service is provided, with a survey or comment card.
3. Muskegon Fire Department provides great services to its customers.

The following graphic indicates the survey results.

Division and Department Heads External Survey

Question	Ratings				
	1	2	3	4	5
1a			33%	50%	17%
1b			17%	50%	33%
1c			50%	50%	
1d			33%	33%	33%
1e			17%	50%	33%
2			17%	33%	50%
3			66%	17%	17%
4			33%	50%	17%
5			17%	66%	17%

The results of the survey provided to the community based organizations focus groups is presented next. Of the twelve surveys distributed three were returned for a 33% return rate. The following comments were provided along with the survey results.

1. Muskegon Fire Department has been very good at reaching out to neighborhoods and their organizations. The new fire station with its community room on the West end of the city is one example. There needs to be something similar in the inner city.
2. Wonderful job, keep up the good work!!
3. The Muskegon Fire Department does an excellent job of interacting with the neighborhoods.

Following are the survey results:

Community Based Organizations External Survey

	Ratings				
	1	2	3	4	5
Question					
1a				33%	33%
1b				33%	33%
1c				66%	33
1d					33%
1e					100%
2					100%
3				33%	66%
4				33%	66%
5					100%

All respondents did not answer some of the questions.

Although this survey response was disappointing, the results are interesting and can be utilized to examine and develop a plan to enhance customer service. The one striking result from the internal survey was that the personnel returning the survey found very little to improve in the areas that they have direct responsibility for. These include fire suppression and EMS. They did find that the areas that fall under the Fire Prevention Bureau were in need of improvement. They also felt that overwhelmingly they went the extra mile for the customer. They also found a need for training in customer service and did provide some excellent comments on ways to improve our relationships. There was also the suggestion for one improvement in the area of enhanced customer service by providing boxes to fire victims to assist in salvaging their possessions.

The external surveys provided much the same information and indicated that the fire department is providing the necessary services on the technical side. The public has come to expect the quality of service delivered by the department and at this time as little expectations in what could be delivered. The only

exceptions noted were in the areas of our new community room at one of the stations, which was noted in the comments of one of the surveys. The other is in the comments from the division and department head focus group, which discusses a few programs that could be implemented along with an excellent suggestion for the implementation of a customer survey or comment card. All of these areas will be examined in detail in the discussion and recommendation sections.

DISCUSSION

It was interesting to note that many of the survey results were in the most and all of the time category. This author believes that the surveys were taken and completed by most respondents from the tactical side of our profession. There is no argument that this side is completed with extreme professionalism and quality. The area that is being examined is going the extra mile and providing the WOW service discussed by Chief Brunacini. It is this level of service that the author was examining and found that all focus groups are in the author's opinion unaware of with a few exceptions.

This is not an area that can be wandered into haphazardly and will take the level of commitment as discussed by all authors read during the literature review. This commitment must start at the top of the organization and permeate throughout. When this paper talks about commitment at the top, this is not just within the fire department. This commitment to quality customer service must

begin with the city management team. It was shown in the survey that there is a level of comfort that prevails at all levels of the organization. This comfort level must be broken and the organization must be willing to make a commitment to change and grow in the area of customer service.

All members of the organization must be willing to step outside their comfort level and grow. This will afford us, as an organization, the ability to provide the best customer service possible. It is the belief of this author that this can be accomplished with little or no cost. All it really takes is the strong commitment, a willingness to let all ideas be heard, and the willingness to be open minded enough to not only listen but to examine each idea constructively, and to see if it can be utilized within the organization.

The answer to Question 5 in the beginning of this paper is simple and straightforward. We must be willing as an organization to expand our services to include ways to provide exceptional quality service to the customer. By thinking of every person we contact as a customer and not the victim or a taxpayer will assist in this process. A customer is someone we service in a variety of ways. We are very good at providing the technical and tactical side of our profession. It is in the area of the extras that we need to improve. If we can keep in mind that all customers are deserving of our very best efforts, that we utilize common sense in our approach to them, and treat every customer as we would want to be treated, we as a department and the fire service as a whole will have gone a long way to providing that quality customer service desired.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are provided to enhance the level of quality in our customer service.

1. Gain the commitment to the idea of quality customer service from city staff.
2. Enter into discussions with the members of the department to discuss ideas on how to improve customer service.
3. Explore and implement all ideas that are feasible and can fit within the current budget. Those that cannot fit into the budget will have to wait until the future when the budget can be adjusted. Most ideas will have minimal if any impact on the budget.
4. Explore educational ideas for all members of the fire department in the areas of customer service. This can be from members within the department that have
5. Implement some of the suggestions that were made on the surveys.

These include the use of a customer survey or comment card that can be given to all customers upon contact with the fire department, the salvage box suggestion could be implemented with little expense, expand the salvage box idea to include a brochure with helpful suggestions on what to do after the fire, implementation of more community first aid and CPR training programs. This list can go on and is only limited by ones imagination.

It is imperative to gain the commitment from the majority of the organization and to begin the process of reshaping the thinking within. We are only limited by our own creativity as to what we can provide for the customer. Has stated before, we are excellent in the delivery of our technical and tactical services. The next step is to increase the quality service side of our relationship with the customer. We need to start thinking on the WOW side and provide that to our customers. In conclusion I would like to reiterate that all who embark on this journey will find it long and at times difficult, but the rewards will be many.

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APPENDIX A-1

Memo

To: All Personnel

From: Bob Grabinski, Fire Marshal

Date: 12/17/97

Re: Customer Service Survey

This survey is part of an Applied Research Project that I must complete as part of the Executive Fire Officer Program from the National Fire Academy. The survey is designed to give this department an overall view of how we perceive our customer service.

A similar survey is being sent to external focus groups within the city. Between the internal and external surveys we can get a good picture of how we perceive ourselves and how the public perceives us with regard to customer service. The survey will also give us some necessary guidance to complete strategic planning for this department.

Please be honest in your evaluation and complete the survey as soon as possible. Leave the completed survey with the secretary or place it in my mailbox located in the secretary's office. It is important to respond with any comments you may have that would assist us in the area of customer service. Your responses will be kept in confidence and only a final tabulation will be published.

Thank you in advance for participating in this project. It should assist us in our relationship with the people we serve.

Muskegon Fire Department Internal Survey

1. How well do we meet the needs of our customers in the following areas?

- (1)Not at all
- (2)Once in a while
- (3)Sometimes
- (4)Most of the time
- (5)All the time

Circle One

A. Fire Suppression	1	2	3	4	5
B. EMS Delivery	1	2	3	4	5
C. Public Education	1	2	3	4	5
D. Fire Investigation	1	2	3	4	5
E. Inspection / Code Enforcement	1	2	3	4	5

2. How well do we treat the customer?

1 2 3 4 5

3. What is your perception of how we communicate with the customer?

1 2 3 4 5

4. How would you rate the amount of training you have received in customer quality service?

2 3 4 5

5. How often have you gone "the extra mile" in assisting a customer?

2 3 4 5

Please write any comments on what you perceive is needed to provide "quality service" to our customer.

APPENDIX B-1

Memo

To: Community Based Organizations Presidents and Executive Directors

From: Bob Grabinski, Fire Marshal

Date: 12/17/97

Re: Customer Service Survey

This survey is part of an Applied Research Project that I must complete as part of the Executive Fire Officer Program from the National Fire Academy. The survey is designed to give this department an overall view of how our customers perceive this department for quality of service.

A similar survey is being conducted internally. Between the internal and external surveys we can get a good picture of how we perceive ourselves and how the public perceives us with regard to customer service. The survey will also give us some necessary guidance to complete strategic planning for this department.

Please be honest in your evaluation and complete the survey as soon as possible. I have enclosed a stamped self-addressed envelope to send the survey back in. It is important to respond with any comments you may have that would assist us in the area of customer service. Your responses will be kept in confidence and only a final tabulation will be published.

Thank you in advance for participating in this project. It should assist us in our relationship with the people we serve.